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ABSTRACT

This very brief paper discusses whether and how to use the learners' native language in the English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classroom in the event that the instructor and all the students share the same language (Spanish in this case). The pedagogic disadvantages for ESL learners of being allowed to fall back on the native language are discussed. Several decisions regarding the uses of the learners' native language in class are highlighted. First, it was decided that use of Spanish by the instructor should be limited to classroom community building (exchanges that helped establish trust, congeniality, comfort in taking risks); affective support (discussions of difficulties, fears, confusion, victories); and discussion of fine or abstract points related to language and culture. These are areas that are very important to the language learning process and that beginning level learners often have great interest in or need but have limited linguistic ability to address. On the issue of translating words or phrases, Spanish use was limited to providing context, clues, or prompts rather than direct translations. Next, regular observation and evaluation of Spanish use in the classroom was undertaken, leading to regular revision as the learners' English knowledge increased. Finally, the instructor talked directly to the learners about the use of Spanish in the class. It is concluded that this policy resulted in mostly positive experiences for the learners and the instructor. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education) (KFT)

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What is the role of native languages in the adult ESL classroom? Do they have one? In several of my recent teaching experiences, I have faced beginning level classes consisting solely of Spanish speakers. Since I speak Spanish myself, one of the first issues that invariably comes to the surface is the use of the Spanish language in our English class. It has prompted me to think critically about native language use in English language classroom and how it impacts my instruction, my interaction with my learners, and their interactions with each other.

Native languages, when discussed at all in the context of English language learning, are usually linked to native language literacy skills development. Native language instruction is proposed as one way of supporting English language and literacy development by addressing low or nonexistent literacy skills in the native language. I am fascinated with this approach, and as a teacher of beginning English learners who sometimes are pre- or low literate, I can appreciate the benefits. However, what I am concerned with is the use of native languages within the actual English language classroom. I have always supported my adult learners' use of their native languages in my classrooms. They can use bilingual dictionaries and can consult amongst themselves in their native languages, as long as they don't rely exclusively on these tools at the expense of practicing English. However, I had never faced an entire class that not only shared a native language themselves, but also shared this language with me. I was concerned about the impact on my class, and about my ability to both take advantage of and manage this tool in my classroom. As teachers, we all know that habits set in the early stages of classes are difficult to reverse. We know that learners

often pay more attention to our examples than our exhortations. We also know that, for learners and for ourselves, periods of frustration, exhaustion, or simple lack of time can prompt us to fall back on a convenient tool like translation. All of these thoughts raised concerns for me as I considered the use of Spanish in my classroom.

I made several decisions prior to the start of classes to help myself better manage my own use of the learners' native language in class. First, I set some guidelines for myself. I focused my use of Spanish in several areas: classroom community building (exchanges that helped establish trust, congeniality, comfort in taking risks); affective support (discussions of difficulties, fears, confusion, victories); and discussion of fine or abstract points related to the language and culture. These are areas that are very important in the language learning process and ones in which the beginning level learners often have great interest and/or need, but limited linguistic ability to address. On the issue of translating words or phrases, I concentrated more on providing context, clues, or prompts, rather than direct translations. Next, I committed myself to regular observation and evaluation of Spanish use in the classroom, and to revision of my position on the subject as circumstances necessitated. Finally, I talked to my learners directly about the use of Spanish in our class, explaining my intentions and expectations and eliciting theirs.

These efforts resulted in mostly positive experiences for the learners and me. In my classroom observations and in conversations with my learners, I found that they primarily viewed our Spanish language use as a means of clarifying and deepening their understanding—of grammar points, of usage conventions, of cultural implications—rather than as simply translation. As English language beginners, they told me that they

were curious about and recognized the importance of such issues, and they welcomed the opportunity and means of addressing them with the input of a native speaker. For these learners and me, the use of Spanish facilitated the processes of building community, validating experiences, and strengthening self-esteem. We used it to foster a supportive network where we explained unfamiliar things to each other in a more familiar way. We used it to commiserate, complain, and share frustrating or frightening experiences with a new language and culture. Those learners going through their silent period seemed to use it as a way to be involved and connected, even before they were ready to jump into English at the level of their classmates. In the case of Spanish, we also used it to find strategies (e.g., exploiting cognates or relating similar grammar structures and usage) that helped us build a bridge between the native language and English. Of course, the learners used it among themselves to offer translations, but they tended to add context or usage advice along with the translations, indicating to me a sensitivity to the complexity of languages beyond "English word = Spanish word."

There were times when I felt the need to check the use of Spanish in my classes, when the potential for it to become too much of a focus or too easy to use became apparent. As a result, I tried to be more diligent in monitoring native language use by the group as a whole and by individual learners. If I saw that the learners were continually asking me for translations of words as a primary learning strategy, responding in Spanish regardless of the language of the question, or consistently declining to speak in English, I knew that I had to take a tougher stand on native language use.

As a result of these experiences, I have started to actively include native languages in my more linguistically diverse beginning classes. Rather than just support learners in using native languages among themselves, I have tried creating activities that encourage learners to share their native languages with their classmates and with me. Some examples of such activities include small group or the whole class creation of illustrated multilingual thematic word lists; learner presentation and comparison of native language greetings or leave-takings with appropriate gestures and body language; or labeling of classroom items, exits, etc. in languages represented in the class. At the same time, if I see learners using their native languages too much as a crutch, or as a way to create cliques or isolate themselves, I work more consciously to create activities with pairings and groupings that can balance the effects.

Discussing the use of native languages in the classroom can create a heated debate. I have found that most teachers either fall on one side or the other—to use or not to use—and feel very strongly about their position. But as a teacher who has spent some time observing native language use in a number of my classes, I find that it warrants more exploration. I have found some ways in which it works. I have also seen the challenges it can present. Ultimately, the decision is one that should be guided by personal teaching philosophy and careful consideration of the learners and the learning context.